

TELLING STORIES WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN CORPORATIVE TRAINING CONTEXT

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Keywords

Digital Storytelling; Digital technologies; Communication; Corporative training.

Abstract

The art of telling stories in digital format is currently widely available due to the popularization of digital cameras, computers and other mobile devices. In this paper we discuss the use of collaborative learning strategies based on Digital Storytelling in corporative training. The text includes a concise review on theoretical and technical foundations about educational communication through the use of audiovisual products based on disciplines such as Communication, Education and Cognitive Sciences. We will also discuss how Digital Storytelling may be integrated in traditional contents oriented self-training systems, used by many corporations. However the main focus will be the discussion of the potential of the use of Digital Storytelling methodology in corporative training context which will be detailed based on data collected in scenarios from Portugal and Brazil. The paper is based on qualitative research and it will argue that digital storytelling may contribute to the improvement of the effectiveness of collaborative learning processes in corporative training, because it provides means for the swift delivery of highly contextualized learning materials and the sharing of relevant personal trainers and trainees' experiences. Furthermore, Digital Storytelling methodology provides an opportunity to value, respect and promote the multiple and different cultural and social interactions in the corporative knowledge construction process. The research methodology adopted on this study involved three phases: 1) literature review; 2) detailed analysis of the digital Storytelling methodology and its implications in corporative training context; 3) collecting data from and discussing about some corporative cases in Portugal and Brazil. The result of the research aims at suggesting a critical analysis and creative attitude in the production of audiovisual teaching materials for the corporative training context.

1. Brief historical and theoretical background for Digital Storytelling

The practice of storytelling is closely associated with peoples' sense of identity (POSTMAN, 1989); moreover, it is one of the core components of human memory and the foundation of several basic mental events (SCHANK, 2005). Vygotsky (1993) claimed that in order to understand and represent their experience in the world, people use languages composed of signs which underpin the basis of human culture. Vygotsky (1993) also highlights that the tools we build to mediate such symbolic activities change the way whereby human beings think. In other words, by building tools, people build the material basis to develop consciousness, change environments and restructure the functional systems where they act and learn. In so doing, paths are created to develop thought and action which have wide repercussions, encompassing individual and collective as well as material and semiotic dimensions.

The process described above is bound to happen, in our point of view, when the Digital Storytelling (hereinafter DS) methodology is introduced into our daily lives. After all, the starting point of DS is individual experience and its main goal is to provide a space of enunciation and narrative about one's own experiences, fostering reflection on the victories and defeats each individual has experienced in his journey. The participants record short life stories in the first person, which are illustrated with meaningful photographs, images, gravures and songs for the storyteller (Miller, 2008). In addition to that, however, collective and collaborative paths aimed at developing thought and action can start by socializing the digital story produced individually.

As regards the use of DS in the context of teaching and learning, Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano (2002) discussed three ways whereby the knowledge building process can be supported by using digital stories. Firstly, they can exemplify certain concepts or principles taught by means of direct instruction. Secondly, stories can act as cases or problems to be investigated by students. Thirdly, they can enable students' access to certain advice which can help them learn problem-solving skills. At this point, it is worth mentioning that according to Vygotsky (1993), social interaction is paramount to human beings' learning and development because people acquire new knowledge by means of the several relations they have with the environment.

In the socio-historical perspective (VYGOSTSKY et al., 1988), mediation is crucial to the construction of knowledge and takes place, among other ways, by means of language. The individual's uniqueness as a socio-historical subject is engendered in his relations in society, and the way people act or think depends on social and cultural interactions with the environment. This means that a great storyteller may evoke an emotional bond with his listeners, contributing to the construction of knowledge. For Frazel (2010), the personal bond between the audience and the storyteller is emotionally charged with visual contact, body language and narration. She believes that bonding with an audience and bringing such bond into the story can be a very rewarding experience for students and teachers.

In short, as we have seen in these brief introductory lines and also as Barret (2006) has pointed out, when it is coupled with digital technologies, narration facilitates the convergence of differentiated learning strategies which, when well equated, can foster the following benefits:

1. Learners' involvement;
2. Reflection for deeper learning;
3. Project-based learning;
4. Effective integration of technology during instruction.

However, in spite of such potential, DS methodology is apparently underused in corporate training contexts.

2. DS methodology in the corporate context

During the qualitative review of the literature that resulted in this paper, we collected and analyzed Brazilian and Portuguese examples of the use of the DS methodology in the corporate context. We reviewed 111 (one hundred eleven) academic articles and 9 (nine) books which addressed the issue of DS to some degree. The foreign academic articles were collected in the *SciVerse Scopus*¹ and *B-on*² electronic databases. The analysis was temporally organized as follows: a) academic articles published in 2008, 2009, 2010 and in the first semester of 2011; b) books published over the last 10 (ten) years.

During our review of the literature, we realized that storytelling with digital technologies has been widely used in advertising to promote a product or company. In some cases, the methodology is used to make the consumer identify with the narrator or one of the characters of the story. In other experiences, the corporations actually support the creation of communities of consumers in social networks. We could find accounts on the use of the methodology to motivate teams, especially sales teams.

As regards the use of methodologies with digital technologies in contexts of corporate training, Savvidou (2010) highlighted the relevance of the concept of “dialogue” in the narrative. She explained that although little attention is given to the concept of narrative as a dialogue in educational contexts, narratives can provide a wide range of research opportunities in the realm of communication and organizational research. In this area, storytelling is seen as a shared social practice whereby explicit and implicit knowledge can be transmitted, and identities can be acquired.

The concept of narrative introduced by Savvidou (2010) in her work is based on theories of verbal communication and the idea that storytelling is dialogic *per se*, hence a story evokes a response whenever it is told. That is, the stories we tell are shaped by the real or potential responses given by interlocutors. This idea represents a view of narrative as a type of dialogue and a challenge to the notion of story as individual construction.

Savvidou (2010) points out that if we observe daily social interactions, we will confirm that personal storytelling does not take place as a monologue but rather as a component of an interactional event, a conversation, where stories are mutually built by the participants. In this process, the roles of storyteller and listener are interchangeable as well. According to Savvidou (2010), studies in the fields of communication and organizational research often include stories of people whose voices are seldom heard, or stories that challenge current rules and organizational structures.

Ultimately, every corporation has stories that permeate its existence and strengthen particular behaviors of its collaborators. In our point of view, such stories can be told digitally and used favorably in corporate training contexts in order to: a) convey the corporation’s mission statement, goals and policies; b) encourage and

¹ *SciVerse Scopus* is a database owned by Elsevier which makes abstracts and full-text academic articles available on the Internet upon subscription.

² *B-on* (Online Knowledge Library) is a web-based library sponsored by user institutions and by UMIC (Knowledge Society Agency) which provides research and higher education institutions in Portugal with unlimited and permanent access to abstracts and full-text academic articles.

promote team spirit; c) engage people in certain strategic actions; d) develop and publicize corporate memory; e) strengthen values and features which are typical of the corporation; f) other possibilities that the reader himself can enumerate.

Although our review has identified the use of DS in some organizations in Brazil and Portugal, the investigation has not found any account which evidenced the use of this methodology in the corporate education context. However, our review has evidenced the importance of a broad reflection on both the contents to be made into DS scripts, and the need to devise audiovisual strategies which may initiate perceptions similar to those of natural origin as they focus on developing non-arbitrary codes and conventions (RODRIGUEZ, 2006). Such audiovisual strategies, in our point of view, can enhance the communication of knowledge as well as contribute to the improved effectiveness of some processes in corporate training. Ultimately, given the agility to design and produce audiovisual materials with the DS technology, means can be offered to quickly produce highly contextualized educational materials.

As a further development of the thought from the previous paragraph, we should point out that the introduction of the DS methodology in the corporate training environment is not a merely instrumental decision. For Porter (2004), there are endless approaches to consider while creating a digital story, depending on the purpose and the target audience. Porter (2004) warns those wishing to use this kind of narrative that some key elements need to be considered. According to her, a DS has to:

1. Lead others to experience their story. In other words, each story has a personal perspective and has to be narrated by the author himself.
2. Always bring a lesson to be learned. One of the most original features of this methodology is the expectation that each story may express a personal meaning or insight on how a given event or situation has touched the author's life (and maybe it will touch the listeners' lives).
3. Develop creative tension. A good story creates intrigue or tension around a situation that arises early in the beginning of the story and has to be resolved in the course of the plot.
4. Be economical. A good story has a destination – a point to make – and seeks the shortest path to reach such destination. A DS piece should be between 3 (three) and 5 (five) minutes, based on a script with one page or 500 (five hundred) words.
5. Show rather than only narrate a story. Good stories use vivid details to disclose feelings and information instead of merely saying something.
6. Encompass both technique and art. A good story incorporates technology and art in a savvy way to demonstrate exemplary ability to communicate with images, sound, voice, color, white space, animation, design, transitions and special effects.

Finally, our review has also found that the DS method can provide an opportunity to promote multiple interactions in the process of construction of knowledge in corporate environments (FRAZEL, 2010; Kearney, 2011). For example, certain proposals for training in an organization will enable the input of tasks via the DS method, causing the students to share their own stories, again via DS methodology. Thus, both trainers and trainees will work on learning with short stories in a digital two-way street.

In summary, our review shows that dialogical communication processes using collaborative learning strategies, such as the DS methodology, can be an alternative to appreciate and respect the multiple social and cultural interactions involved in the

training context. It is something that can leverage the movements of individual and collective learning, which are so healthy in the process of construction of knowledge at any level or type of education.

3. Final remarks

The DS methodology creates the possibility for any citizen, provided that they have access to certain technologies and techniques, to tell their own story digitally. In the context of education and corporate training, DS resizes the potential need for audiovisual production by highly specialized teams, and points to the possibility of giving voice and visibility to digital stories produced by those on both ends of the teaching and learning process: the student/learner and the teacher/trainer.

Our aim in producing this article was to reflect on the DS methodology in the process of construction of knowledge in organizations. The document was based on a qualitative review of the literature and argued that the DS can contribute to improving the effectiveness of the teaching process in corporate training, because it provides a means for quick design of highly contextualized learning materials. In addition, the DS method can provide an opportunity for the promotion of multiple interactions in the construction of knowledge in organizations, because strategies can be introduced in certain training proposals to encourage the sharing of digital stories between trainers and trainees, as a two-way street.

In summary, the findings outlined above endorse the need to continue the research project currently being developed in a partnership between the University of Aveiro and *Portugal Telecom Inovação* whose aim is to systematize and validate a methodology for using DS in the context of vocational training. It is certainly an opportunity to discuss the role of the trainer, technicians, trainees and other characters involved in the reflexive and cooperative construction of knowledge in the corporate environment.

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